

What is Hell? A Short Theology of Hell

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April 21, 2026

Throughout church history there has been a wide variety of means and associations surrounding the word and concept *hell*. This has caused many Christians to not fully understand what Jesus and New Testament authors mean when they talk about hell. In the New Testament, *gehenna* is the Greek word consistently translated as hell in most English translations of the Bible. But *gehenna* is not even a Greek word, it is a Hebrew word spelled with Greek letters. *Gehenna* is the English translation of the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew phrase: *Gey Ben Hinnom*. *Gey Ben Hinnom* literally means the “Valley of the Son of Hinnom”. It then got shortened to just *Ge Hinnom*, then to *Genom* (from where the Greek derives *gehenna*) which simply means the “Valley of Hinnom.” At some point in the history of Israel’s occupation of Cannon and, specifically, Jerusalem, there was a guy named Gey Hinnom, who purchased the property of that valley and then he bequeathed to his son. In Hebrew, *ben* means “son of.” So, the valley became known as *Gey Ben Hinnom*. It is an actual valley just outside the southwest corner of Jerusalem that is still called by this name today.

The first reference to this valley is in the book of Joshua as the borders of the land of Israel were being judicated. This was the valley that connected the tribe of Benjamin’s territory to the tribe of Judah’s (Josh. 15:8). But something happened in this valley that turned it into an image and symbol that Jesus and the New Testament authors used as one of their primary means to talk about the ultimate divine justice, when God would right all wrongs and every wrongdoing will have their just consequence. Beginning in the 13th century AD, medieval Jerusalem, there was an urban legend that perpetuated for centuries that stated this valley was Jerusalem’s trash dump where people would put their trash for it to be burned. Commentators then began to attribute Jesus’ descriptions of God's justice in reference to this trash dump valley, for just as the

trash was incinerated, so God would incinerate evil doers. Unfortunately, this is not true and not what Jesus or New Testament authors referenced as gehenna, or hell.

In actuality, the books of Kings, Chronicles, and Jeremiah record a vastly different and more real story. They record that this valley became the location of a number of shrines Israel had dedicated to the local Canaanite gods, predominantly, as housing the site of child sacrifice. In 2 Chronicles 28 we are told that when Ahab, who lived in the in the mid 8th century BC, became king of Israel, he did evil in the sight of the Lord. In the Valley of Ben Hinnom, he made molten images for the gods of Baal and burned his sons in fire according to the abominations of other nations (2 Chron. 28:1-4). A few generations later, another one of Israel's king, Manasse, did the same thing. King Manasse built shrines and altars to different deities, and in the Valley of Hinnom, he burnt his children alive as a sacrifice, where he also practiced witchcraft and divination after the fire (2 Chron. 33:1-6; 2 Kings 21). While this was common practice in other Ancient Near East cultures that Israel disobediently joined in, it was always an abhorrence to Yahweh and Israel's prophets, specifically, Jeremiah.

Now, it is crucial to understand what Jeremiah said and its implication of what happened regarding the burning children in the Valley of Ben Hinnom because, I'm convinced, this is the imagery and symbols that Jesus and New Testament authors drew upon when they referred to gehenna (hell). Jeremiah, who lived after Ahab but in the same time as Manasse, recorded the horrific practice happening in Valley of Ben Hinnom. In Jeremiah 7 he wrote, *"For the Judeans have done what is evil in my sight." This is the Lord's declaration. "They have set up their abhorrent things in the house that bears my name in order to defile it. They have built the high places of Topheth in Ben Hinnom Valley in order to burn their sons and daughters in the fire, a thing I did not command; I never entertained the thought"* (Jer. 7:30-32). Jeremiah declares

God's judgment on Israel and all who practiced these fire sacrifice rituals. In Hebrew *topheth* means “a funeral platform that you set on fire” in order to burn a dead person. But in this case, Israel’s kings and priests were burning living people, not dead people. Yahweh makes really clear that He never commanded child or human sacrifices. What God declares next becomes an inversion what Israel did. *“Therefore, look, the days are coming” the LORD’s declares, “when this place will no longer be called Topheth and Ben Hinnom Valley, but Slaughter Valley. Topheth will become a cemetery, because there will be no other burial place. The corpses of these people will become food for the birds of the sky and for the wild animals of the land, with no one to scare them away. I will remove from the cities of Judah and the streets of Jerusalem the sound of joy and gladness and the voices of the groom and the bride, for the land will become a desolate waste” (Jer. 30:33-34).*

Jeremiah recorded that if Israel did not turn from its ways, God was going to hand them over to the king of Babylon to destroy Jerusalem. And in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, where the kings and the priests of Jerusalem had started fires to sacrifice and take the lives of innocent children, God's was going to invert, “turn the script” on them. God declared that when the city was taken by Babylon, the Israelites slain bodies would be so numerous that there would not be any room for proper burial in the city. So, their bodies were to be tossed into this Valley of Ben Hinnom where it all started. It is an inversion punishment because the valley where they were sacrificing children and worshipping other gods is going to become the valley that's going to be the burial ground, a gruesome image, for the bodies of the people once lit those fires. In other words, it was as if God was saying “The valley where you lit fires to consume the lives of innocent children will be the place where you meet your death and where your dead body is thrown as a consequence for what you've done.” Gey Ben Hinnom (Gehenna or hell), then,

became a symbol and image that Jesus and New Testament biblical authors, as well as Jewish and Christian apocalyptic literature, used to depict of the fate of the dead who turn from Yahweh. The biblical understanding of hell is less about giving us the exact details about a place, and more about the fact that there is a terrible reality for all who reject Jesus as their Lord.